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Application of Relevance Theory to L2 Classroom Interaction Analysis

1. Introduction

The present shift from the psycholinguistic to the sociocultural focus on second language acquisition (SLA) studies has its impact on a renewed interest in second/foreign (L2) classroom interaction analysis. The aim of this paper is to apply Relevance Theory to L2 classroom interaction against the historical background of other approaches. An overview of those approaches is given in the first part of the paper. The second part focuses on the application of Relevance Theory to L2 classroom interaction analysis.

Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) belongs to pragmatic theories of human communication, but at the same time it is also a theory of human cognition, consequently, it can be treated as a psycholinguistic theory. The present holistic treatment of the L2 learning/teaching process and its participants has expanded the range of applications of pragmatic and psycholinguistic theory to encompass different sociocultural settings. Indeed the authors of Relevance Theory claim that the level of attempted relevance can vary according to circumstances and social occasions. In consequence, this author assumes that it is possible to interpret L2 classroom interaction in the light of Relevance Theory (Niżegorodcew 2007).

2. Survey of Approaches to L2 Classroom Interaction

Approaches to L2 classroom interaction can be divided into those that originate from teacher training courses, those that stem from Unequal Talk analysis, from SLA Discourse Theory and Interaction Theory, Communication Strategies, Conversation Analysis, and finally, those that are derived from Pragmatic Theory. Some of them are more explicit than others in their focus on L2 classroom interaction analysis and have developed

methodological tools to study its various aspects. Others can be only perceived as tools for analysing L2 classroom interaction in retrospection. Let us briefly overview the most characteristic features of each of the above perspectives.

Allwright (1980) tries to find patterns in classroom interaction that could provide teacher trainees with models of best exchanges from the methods of teaching point of view. The author is not primarily concerned with L2 teaching, neither is his focus psycholinguistic or sociocultural. He is a teacher trainer believing in the feasibility of identifying the best method of teaching in general.

Other authors, such as e.g. Bellack *et al.* (1966) and Sinclair *et al.* (1972) discover functional and formal categories in classroom discourse: four functional moves (structuring, soliciting, responding and reacting), as well as five hierarchical classroom discourse structures (lesson, transaction, exchange, move and act).[1]

(1) Teacher (T): *Shall we move on*? (structuring)
What was our last lesson? (soliciting)
Student (S): *The mediaeval town.* (responding)
Teacher (T): *Yes, last time we talked about the mediaeval town.* (reacting)

(2) [A physics lesson in a Polish Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) class]

Exchange I
T: *What happens to the air*? (Move I)
S: *It becomes warmer.* (Move II)
T: *Yes, it becomes warmer.* (Move III)

Exchange II
T: *Why it becomes warmer*? (Move I) etc.

According to the Interactional Speech Acts Model (Edmondson 1981), in naturalistic discourse each move consists of three acts: uptake, head and appealer. While the second informative act is the core of each move, the first and the third acts are optional, and their function is interpersonal. They link interactive exchanges together. In L2 classroom interaction students perform only informative acts because they are supposed to display their L2 competence, whereas it is the teacher who performs all inter-

[1] Examples 1–2 come from Mazur (2000).

personal acts. In consequence, according to Edmondson, students do not acquire interpersonal language and are not able to use it in real life interaction.

Unequal Talk refers to interactive exchanges in which participants have an unequal status due to their unequal language proficiency, which is combined with age and/or educational and social status. Thus, Unequal Talk studies refer to exchanges between caregivers and children, native and non-native speakers, native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) and teachers and students (e.g. Henzl 1973; Gaies 1977). From initial studies focused on characteristic features of caregiver, NS to foreigner and teacher talk, that is one-sided interest in more competent participants' simplifications of the language code, Unequal Talk approaches have evolved into studies focused on interaction *sensu stricto* (see Majer 2003). Gradually, unequal talk studies have also become sociolinguistic, sociocultural and sociopolitical in nature (Phillipson 1992).

Both Hatch (1978) and, in particular, Long (1983), representatives of SLA Discourse Theory and Interaction Theory, analyse L2 users' negotiation of meanings in face-to-face interactions. They treat L2 interaction, including L2 classroom interaction, as having direct bearing on internal language acquisition processes. Interactive discourse modifications, such as clarification requests (e.g. *What does it mean?*), confirmation checks (e.g. *Do you mean "spark"?*), comprehension checks (e.g. *Do you follow me?*), expansions and repetitions of interlocutors' or own turns on the part of NSs (or L2 teachers) and NNSs (or students) are believed to have direct impact on language acquisition. They are claimed to provide students with L2 "comprehensible input," which according to Krashen's model can become learners' "intake," that is, acquired language used in spontaneous utterances.

The strong claims about the causal character of interactive discourse modifications for SLA were afterwards modified by Long to refer only to some areas of language, such as lexicon, where indeed L2 input modifications and adjustments can be noticed and acquired by NNSs and students. However, from the L2 classroom interaction perspective, SLA Discourse Theory and Interaction Theory approaches have been concerned more with L2 acquisition processes than with L2 classroom interaction patterns themselves, a possible reason being a psycholinguistic concern with L2 acquisition as opposed to L2 use (Gass 1998).

Communication strategies compensate for gaps and deficiencies in L2 competence in face-to face interaction (Faerch, Kasper 1983). Detailed communication strategies categories have been introduced, among others, by Tarone (1980). Other researchers have tried to categorise them according to broad principles of strategic behaviour. Kellerman, Bongaerts and Poulisse (1987) distinguish between approximative (holistic substitution of the missing item), analytical (descriptive substitution of the missing item) and linguistic strategies (involving code-switching). Bialystok (1990) distinguishes only two categories: analysis-based and control-based strategies (the former resembles approximative and analytical strategies and the latter linguistic strategies in Kellerman, Bongaerts and Polisse's taxonomy). This author introduces a different categorization, based on learners' observed activity in interactive discourse: active and passive strategies (Niżegorodcew 1991).[2]

(3) S: Nie wiem, jak to powiedzieć. [*I don't know how to say it.*]
(active communication strategy: appealing for the interlocutor's help)
T: *He is looking.*

(4) T: *What are they doing?*
S: *They are* [. . .] *they are doing.*
(passive communication strategy: repetition)
T: *They are going.*
S: *Going.*
(passive communication strategy: repetition)

Conversation Analysis draws on ethnography of naturalistic communication. It treats L2 classroom interaction as a variety of naturalistic communication. Since its origin in the works of the sociologists Sachs, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), Conversation Analysis has been characterised by strict empiricism, no theoretical assumptions and attempts to discover hidden meanings of conversations on the grounds of the participants' common experience and situational context.

Conversational Analysis has mainly focused on short interactional turns. One of the main patterns discovered in naturalistic conversations is the occurrence of adjacency pairs and a characteristic structure consisting of topic nomination, topic ratification, elaboration and comment (Richards and Schmidt 1983).

[2] Examples 3–4 come from Niżegorodcew (1991) and (1993).

(5) A: *How's life?* (topic nomination)
B: *Fine, thanks.* (topic ratification)
A: *Much work?* (elaboration)
B: *Can't complain.* (comment)

Stereotypical phrases characteristic of a given culture can reveal their underlying meaning and function, particularly when they are compared with their counterparts in a different culture. A traditional Polish topic ratification and comment to the above topic nomination and elaboration could be:

(6) A: *Co słychać?* [How's life?]
B: *Stara bieda.* [Old misery]
A: *Dużo pracy?* [Much work?]
B: *Makabra.* [Horror]

In contemporary L2 classroom interaction analysis, conversations can be analysed in free communicative activities, which resemble real conversations to a much greater extent than traditional L2 dialogues. In the past decade, Sociocultural SLA Theory has used Conversational Analysis as its main research tool (Lantolf 2000), although in L2 classroom interaction its application is limited because topics are imposed upon the students by the syllabus and the teacher, and students have limited power to ratify topics. L2 classroom conversations mostly consist of transactional (informative) turns, in which a given topic and/or task is imposed by a role card script. For instance, the following role-card specifies a request for a bank loan. No heed is taken of L2 students' lack of experience in negotiating bank loans.[3]

(7) S1: *Good morning. I would like to borrow 25,000 pounds to start a small business.*
S2: *What business?*
S1: *A hotel.*
S2: *Where have you worked? What experience have you got?*
S1: *I have worked at a hotel in South Poland.* [. . .]
S2: *And if you* zbankrutujesz? [*go bankrupt*]
S1: *I earn a lot and I can soon pay it back.*
S2: *I must think about it. Come again.*
S1: *OK.*

[3] Example 7 comes from Fryc (2000).

Conversation Analysis in the sociocultural approaches serves not only as a way of investigating L2 classroom interaction patterns, but also as a method of awareness raising. Students from different cultural backgrounds become aware of pragmatic aspects of conversational turns in their own language and in other languages (Kondo 2008).

The relationship between politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon and type of interaction has been investigated by a number of researchers (see Alcon Soler and Martinez-Flor 2008), who discovered, for instance, that during emergency situations participants focus on tasks and disregard politeness strategies. A recent student study on L2 teaching materials (Mendrek 2009) confirms that teaching and testing materials limit pragmatic competence to L2 phrases used in interaction in order to express various language functions, without taking into account their level of formality and the sociocultural context.

Summing up about forty years of theoretical and research interest in L2 classroom interaction, what can be seen is the development of the field from rather superficial classifications of teachers' and students' behaviour, through attempts to verify psycholinguistic theory in L2 interaction, to view L2 interaction either as an instance of unequal power relationship, an exemplification of strategic behaviour, or a specific pattern of face-to-face conversation, to its integration with pragmatic theory. It seems that the development of the field of L2 classroom interaction is still in progress and its future will be even more multifaceted.[4] In the following part of this paper an attempt is made to combine a pragmatic and a psycholinguistic perspective in applying Relevance Theory to L2 classroom interaction.

3. Relevance Theory Applied to L2 Classroom Interaction Analysis

L2 classroom interaction has two purposes: the primary purpose of the L2 teacher is to teach the target language by providing, explicitly or implicitly, the L2 model, that is, accurate L2 forms; and the secondary purpose is to provide opportunities for communication, that is, develop L2 fluency. Communicative Language Teaching and Task Based Language Teaching

[4] For a comprehensive overview of the field of L2 classroom interaction see Majer (2003). A more pedagogical perspective of L2 classroom interaction is presented in Łęska (2008).

place communicative practice in the centre of L2 classroom interaction, which may mislead teachers and students to believe that the teacher's role in L2 classroom interaction is limited only to providing opportunities for communication. Since human beings in naturalistic communication are first of all focused on meaning and disregard form (see Skehan 1998), in L2 classroom interaction which resembles naturalistic interaction, teachers and students may focus only on the secondary purpose of L2 classroom interaction (see Gozdawa-Gołębiowski 2004).

Relevance Theory is concerned with recognition and expression of interlocutors' intentions. In accordance with the Principle of Relevance, the main part of the comprehension process involves interpreting an utterance as the most relevant one the speaker could have made in a given context. "The presumption of optimal relevance is communicated by every act of ostensive [overt] communication" (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 158).

In Niżegorodcew (2007) this author proposed an approach to L2 classroom teachers' input based upon Relevance Theory and applied to L2 classroom interaction. The key concept in the approach is "the level of expected optimal relevance." In L2 classroom interaction such expected optimal relevance may mean focusing on fluency, on accuracy, or on fluency combined with accuracy practice.

In SLA theory there is a clear distinction made between interaction in the naturalistic environment and interaction in the instructional environment (Carroll 1995). According to some SLA models (e.g. Krashen's and Long's models of SLA) it is only naturalistic interaction that drives subconscious restructuring of the L2 system and its acquisition. In other words, naturalistic interaction is almost sufficient in SLA. However, as conceded by SLA theorists, some aspects of L2 cannot be restructured on the basis of naturalistic interaction alone, and they must be consciously learned in instructional interaction. Carroll further claims that "secondary linguistic data [teacher's feedback in instructional interaction] are largely irrelevant to the ongoing communicative event in which they may occur" (Carroll 1995: 76).

This is precisely what has been questioned in Niżegorodcew (2007) in the light of Relevance Theory. L2 classroom interaction analysis provides us with evidence that teachers and students interpret L2 classroom interaction as such in which communicative and corrective functions are much more closely linked than in naturalistic interaction. As observed in

Unequal Talk approaches, teachers are granted the right to interrupt and correct students' turns, but the students are also encouraged to inquire about the correctness of their L2 forms.[5]

It should be noted that L2 classroom interaction consists of a number of discourse types, which can be divided into explicit teaching and classroom communication. In turn, explicit teaching can be subdivided into the presentation of L2 to the students and the feedback to the students. Classroom communication can be subdivided into real communication, involving talking about the learning content and talking about organizational and social matters, and simulated communication, that is, fluency practice in role-plays and general class discussions.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), input is relevant to the hearer when it produces enough contextual effect for the least processing effort. In order to comprehend the teacher's intention, the student has to arrive at contextual assumptions on the basis of his/her knowledge, without putting too much effort into the process. Relevance Theory involves different levels of expected optimal relevance, relative to the processing effort needed to reach contextual effects.

It has been claimed in Niżegorodcew (2007) that since the expected level of relevance should be always optimal, if the teachers focus on accuracy, according to the Principle of Relevance, they communicate to the students that they intend them to believe that they communicate something that is optimally relevant at the given moment. Conversely, if the teachers are concerned only with fluency practice, they communicate to the students that they should not pay attention to formal accuracy because it is fluency that is optimally relevant at the given moment.

However, teachers can focus students both on fluency and accuracy. Such simultaneous focus on accuracy and fluency requires an increased expenditure of energy and moves L2 classroom interaction to a higher level of expected optimal relevance. What follows is that none of the above discourse types has solely one purpose. While presenting L2 or providing L2 feedback, teachers can also create opportunities for fluency practice. On the other hand, during classroom communication, teachers can momentarily focus on accuracy, give mini-lectures on L2 grammar or

[5] Students' active participation in L2 classroom interaction depends on the general culture of L2 classrooms and society at large. In more democratic classrooms and societies students are encouraged to take an active part in classroom interaction, whereas in more authoritarian ones such behaviour is discouraged.

lexicon, and correct students' errors. One of the most common techniques is asking questions and eliciting self-corrections from the students.[6]

(8) T: *What was the weather over the weekend?*
S: *It was cold and it rained.*
T: *All the weekend?*
S: *No, with breaks. It rained on Saturday and until 2 p.m. o'clock on Sunday.*
T: *If you use "p.m." do not use "o'clock."*
S: *It rained until 2 p.m. on Sunday.*

In the first part of the above exchange, the teacher focuses the student's attention on the meaning of the question, although the question belongs to "display" questions, where the teacher knows the answer but he/she wishes to elicit it from the student. At the same time, however, the teacher provides an opportunity for communication. The second question continues the teacher's focus on communicative fluency practice. However, when the student produces an erroneous form, L2 accuracy becomes immediately relevant for the teacher in the context of instructional interaction. He/she momentarily focuses on the L2 code, raising the expected optimal level of relevance to fluency combined with accuracy practice. The teacher's correction becomes relevant to the student in the context of L2 classroom interaction and he/she repeats the corrected utterance.

Apart from typical classroom interaction moves: soliciting, responding and reacting (see above), L2 classroom interaction involves an additional move – repeating. This structure indicates that L2 classroom interaction has two purposes: to teach L2 and to provide opportunities for communication in L2. If the above structure is modified, and its corrective function is vague, in other words, if the instructional interaction resembles naturalistic communication, students do not interpret the teachers' intentions as double. Consequently, they focus only on communication and fluency, disregarding formal accuracy and correction of errors. Such an approach leads to incomplete L2 acquisition and careless L2 use, as in Example 9.[7]

(9) S1: *Why haven't you been to the party?*
S2: *Because I am ill.*

[6] Example 8 comes from Kusibab (1984).
[7] Example 9 comes from Fryc (2000).

S1: *Oh, sorry. What problem do you have?*
S2: *I have flu.*
S1: *Oh, and the party was great, I enjoy it.*
T: *I enjoyed it.*
S2: *Who was at the party?*
S1: *Everybody "oprócz"* [except] *you.*
T: *Everybody but you.*
S2: *What were you doing?*
S1: *Dancing, talking, listening music.*
T: *OK.*

4. Conclusion

In Niżegorodcew (2007) this author drew the conclusion that L2 classroom interaction is neither identical with naturalistic communication, nor entirely focused on teaching the L2 system. It was also claimed that SLA Input Theory did not take account of *real* L2 classroom communication and teaching. In the observed classes the primary purpose of teacher--students interaction was to present L2 structure and lexicon, as well as to provide corrective feedback at certain stages of the teaching process. However, its secondary purpose was simultaneously to communicate in L2 in real and simulated fluency practice.

Relevance Theory sheds light on how students and teachers interpret the double purpose of L2 classroom interaction because it provides conceptual tools for the interpretation of fluency combined with accuracy practice. In view of the natural tendency, as claimed by Relevance Theory, to focus on the most relevant information, whatever is in focus in L2 classroom interaction, becomes automatically optimally relevant. That is why L2 classroom interaction must combine teaching and communication, and make it explicit for the students in order to make both fluency and accuracy relevant. I believe that the specific nature of L2 classroom interaction, stemming from its double purpose, can be interpreted in the light of Relevance Theory as an automatic process of searching for optimal relevance.

In such a way we have come back to the approaches that described L2 classroom interaction in order to provide models for teacher trainees. Relevance Theory can also tell L2 teachers how to build up classroom interaction in order to facilitate the L2 learning process (see Niżegorod-

cew 2004). On the basis of Relevance Theory it is possible to support the view that L2 teachers' explicit corrections followed by students' repetitions seem to be the most effective feedback for L2 learning.

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